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## HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 16-09

### **Buzzard Point Power Plant**

1930 1<sup>st</sup> Street SW (and 2000 Half Street SW)  
Square 665, part of Lot 32 and Square 667E, Lot 805

Meeting Date: February 24, 2022  
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League

Affected ANC: 6D

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The Historic Preservation Office recommends the Board designate PEPCO's Buzzard Point Power Plant a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with three contributing buildings, and with a period of significance of 1933 to 1945, from the completion of the initial plant buildings until the end of World War II.

### **Background**

Experiments with electric lighting in Washington date back to 1867, with generators set up at prominent buildings and events into the mid 1880s. The Heisler Company installed some streetlights downtown in 1881-1882, employing a generator within the Washington Post building. The Capitol and White House were wired in 1885 and 1890, respectively. Heisler reorganized as the United States Electric Lighting Company (USELCO) in 1882 and built a new generation plant at B and 13<sup>th</sup> streets NW in 1887.

Proven elsewhere, it was not until the 1890s that streetlights and broader electric service would begin to become available in the District, struggling to accommodate Congress's prohibition on overhead wires. But the demand for electric streetcar service forced the question, and electric suppliers used surplus power from new transportation systems for lighting and other uses. New streetcar lines also meant new housing that could be easily wired and add to a utility's customer base.

A Potomac Electric Company organized in 1891 and erected its first generating station on the Virginia side of Chain Bridge. The company went into receivership in 1893, a probable consequence of having to construct extensive infrastructure before reaping rewards from rate-payers. A couple of reorganizations led to Potomac Light and Power incorporating in Virginia, finally winning the right to extend its lines across the river in 1896 and to compete on price with the dominant USELCO. By the end of the year, the upstart had won the bid for a D.C. streetlight contract and would soon buy out USELCO, merging the companies into the Potomac Electric Power Company.

PEPCO secured contracts for power to independent electric street railways and interurbans in the District of Columbia, installing feeders to Brightwood, the Washington Street substation,

Eckington and Riverdale, and Montrose Junction on the Tenleytown-Rockville line in the mid to late 1890s. In 1902, it combined the several independent railways into a unified system and formally combined the two lighting companies as a subsidiary of the Washington Railway and Electric Company (WRECo).

PEPCO established a new central power plant on Benning Road in 1906 and closed most of its older generating stations the following year. As a subsidiary of WRECo, “PEPCO was a captive of the traction interests,” its service initially limited to the vicinity of the tracks. After World War I, however, electric demand skyrocketed, with additional population and construction—and new uses for electricity in homes and businesses. In 1925, the company boasted more than 100,000 meters. PEPCO continued to expand the Benning Road plant through 1931, and established numerous modernized substations to distribute stepped-down voltage to new neighborhoods. While under the new ownership of the North American Company, the power company’s headquarters, generating facilities, and distributing operations at 14<sup>th</sup> and B streets were displaced by the Federal Triangle development, necessitating construction in other locations. In 1930 alone, it built a new headquarters at 999 E Street NW, a new service station at 10<sup>th</sup> Street and Florida Avenue NW, and Substation No. 25 on Champlain Street. Most important was the construction of the Buzzard Point generating station in 1932-1933.

At the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia rivers, “Turkey Buzzard Point” appears on Maryland maps by 1700. Never fulfilling its promise as a commercial or industrial center, the sparsely populated peninsula nonetheless slowly filled with mostly low-intensity industrial uses during the second quarter of the twentieth century. Increasingly, the area was served by railroads which could bring coal to fuel steam turbines. PEPCO engaged the nationally prominent Stone & Webster Engineering Company to erect a new, fireproof plant to more than replace the lost capacity at 14<sup>th</sup> and B, and to accommodate future expansion. The building envelope was designed by PEPCO’s in-house architect, George Wryen. In blond brick with a substantial base, a projecting entry piece, reeded piers and striking chevron friezes in limestone, it has both Art Deco panache and the muscular spareness that characterized industrial architecture of its era. The *Washington Post* published its admiration of the plant’s modern efficiency, safety features, and sheer size. “Architecturally, the new structure, by its simple lines and pleasing proportions, would ornament any part of the city.” Advising the District Commissioners, the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts had insisted upon high-quality materials, despite sudden cost constraints brought by the Depression. Not quite the same level of attention was lavished on the precast details of the plant’s matching-brick water-intake building on the Anacostia shore (now home to the Matthew Henson Earth Conservation Center).

With its extensive north yard and an unadorned rear wall, the plant was calculated for expansion, and expansion was quickly required. Matching 1939-1940 and 1942-1943 additions can be visually distinguished on the exterior by joints in the west walls. The first addition was fortuitously timed, as the country was soon entangled in a second world war. Buzzard Point would quickly become PEPCO’s primary plant sufficient to provide the base supply to the local grid, but it required additional generating units and the second addition to handle the extra demands of Washington’s wartime infrastructure, including operations at the Navy Yard, Fort McNair, the Indian Head Naval Station, and a new Pentagon.

## **Significance**

The property is significant under National Register Criterion A and District of Columbia Criterion B for its history, for its contribution to the growth of the District of Columbia. Like other major pieces of utility infrastructure—water and sewer systems, heating plants, gas facilities—the electrical power plant has made modern life possible. Not the first of the local electric generating stations, Buzzard Point nonetheless shouldered much of area demand from the time of its completion, including supporting suburbanization and commercial and residential infill, and a wartime expansion of defense facilities. Its opening was contemporaneous with the construction of long-distance transmission lines linking the District, Maryland and Pennsylvania—today’s power grid in embryo. Although fueled by coal throughout the period of significance, the expansion of electric power generation provided clean motive power to the end user. Through the period of significance, the plant was still powering the growth of the city and much of its public transportation. It was crucial to the expanding defense facilities during World War II. The Buzzard Point plant is one of the most significant uses in the history of the District of Columbia’s Southwest quadrant. The Board has designated three PEPCO substations, and surely a central generating plant is at least as important.

Not as elaborately decorated as the Edwardian landmark Main Sewerage Pumping Station, Buzzard Point can nonetheless assume its place beside it as both a historic and architectural landmark. It is more comparable in date, use, and architectural expression to the Central Heating Plant and Western Heating Plant, both landmarks, and is notable for its excellent Art Deco detail and pleasing proportions. It is a fine example of Depression-era industrial architecture, specifically as an electrical generating plant, designed, in part, by masters of such facilities, Stone & Webster, a forerunner of the national engineering/design conglomerates of today. For these reasons, the property merits designation under National Register Criterion C, as distinctive of a “type [or] period... of construction or that represent[s] the work or a master, or that possess[es] high artistic value...” Similarly, it meets District of Columbia designation criteria D and F, as a work of masters, embodying characteristics of an architectural style and building type and as an expression of engineering and design significant to the appearance and the development of the District and its region, and more specifically as a visual landmark of Southwest.

## **Period of significance and contributing features**

The period of significance should obviously commence with the completion of construction of the plant and its water-intake building in 1933. Also important are the plant’s early additions, designed to extend and to match the building, the second completed in 1943. The guard house near the western edge of the property appears to date to the early 1940s as well, with its similar brick and its concrete coping and canopy. It likely represents the increased level of facility security during World War II and should be considered contemporaneous with and contributing to the character of the landmark. That raises the count of contributing buildings to *three*.

The proposed period of significance would terminate at 1940, suggesting that the second addition is of lesser significance and not character-defining. That would likely exclude the guard house as well, and the general significance of the plant to the war effort. Instead, a terminal date of 1943 would include the construction of the second addition. But a date of 1945 would cover the addition of yet another generating unit and the end of the conflict. It was also the last full year of PEPCO’s status as a subsidiary of the North American Company, which had bought the power

company in 1928, but was forced to relinquish it by government regulators in an antitrust action delayed by the war. As to its practical effect, the difference between 1943 and 1945 is a quibble.

Since that time, the plant equipment, inside and out, has been updated and will continue to change; it should not be considered historic. Little would date to the period of significance, and any structures must be seen as ephemeral and noncontributing. Indeed, the nomination proposes to exclude from designation much of the northern end of the property and its walls, fences, structures and equipment. Nor is the interior proposed for landmarking.

### **Landscape**

At this industrial facility in an isolated location, a designed landscape was never a focus. The street frontage has simple lawns, with the only significant and formal built elements being the lead walk and steps and flagpole in the largely disused, original front yard. Not of primary significance, these features should nonetheless be maintained as early and enduring features.

Site security has increasingly been a focus, with fences and very high concrete walls erected at the property perimeter, often obscuring views into the northern portion of the compound. To the extent they stand within the proposed boundary, these, like the exterior equipment and the structures postdating the period of significance, should be found not to contribute to the character of the landmark.

### **Integrity**

In its same location, in its historic use by the company that built it, and with building exteriors substantially the same as during World War II (albeit with many replacement windows and doors, new equipment and fencing, altered paving, etc.), the property retains a high degree of physical and historic integrity.

### **Boundary**

The proposed boundary is adequate and excludes most of the northern portion of Lot 32 in Square 655, which lacks contributing elements. The property owner's consultant has recommended that the northern boundary be shifted southward. There appears to be no compelling historical reason to do so. PEPCO may wish to subdivide in the future, and that raises the possibility of this segment of U Street being re-opened. The nomination's boundary description says puts the north boundary at U Street, without stating which side or within. But the neatest answer in terms of description and delineation, while allowing some space around the plant building, is to confirm the boundary at the north side of U Street, as shown in the nomination's proposed map.

### **Archaeology**

The vicinity would have been favorable for human occupation throughout the prehistoric, contact, and historic periods, and remains from all periods are expected where subsequent development has not caused a loss of resources. Potential prehistoric resources include remains of habitation sites such as a camp or village, or special-use sites such as fishing stations. The Potomac and Anacostia rivers' stream terraces and floodplains were excellent locations for finding prehistoric artifacts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the National Museum of Natural History has large collections from the area. Site P26 is an approximate location for a prehistoric site identified by William Henry Holmes, archaeologist at the

Smithsonian's Bureau of Ethnology. This site is reputed to have been on the eastern bank of James Creek.

Only a small portion of Square 665's northwest corner has been surveyed, and a buried surface was identified that yielded a quartz flake fragment, as well as artifacts dating between the eighteenth through twentieth centuries. Potential historic resource types could include nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century domestic and commercial sites as well as possible resources related to the Civil War, World War I and World War II. Square 665 encompasses former Squares 665 and 667, which were sparsely developed during the mid-nineteenth century. By the late nineteenth century, both squares were depicted as subdivided, but only one lot was improved, north of where the power plant stands today. The area may have seen undocumented uses during the wars, given the proximity to Fort McNair and being located along the rivers and the James Creek Canal. During the first quarter of the twentieth century, just prior to the plant's construction, minimal development fronted Half Street SW. The land to the north of the power plant was improved with possible World War II temporary housing, cleared in the 1950s. The plant previously had rail tracks running south into the facility. The square retains archaeological potential, although given the level of disturbance caused by subsequent development, including construction of the plant and other land-clearing efforts, potential is mixed and uncertain.